

Comparison of Academic Performance of Settled-Out and Mobile Migrant Children in Northwest Ohio¹

JEFFREY J. GORDON AND MARYBOB STRAUB, Department of Geography, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403 and Department of Foreign Languages, Ada High School, Ada, OH 45810

ABSTRACT. The non-nomadic lifestyle of settled-out migrant children was felt to be more conducive to positive academic achievement than that of their still mobile peers. Thus, an academic comparison between these two types of migrant school children was suggested and undertaken. The three-part working hypothesis of this study was that settled-out migrant school children will be found to: 1. academically outperform still mobile migrant children; 2. exhibit a significantly higher level of academic superiority; and 3. demonstrate improvement in academic performance with time. These three findings were expected to occur because settled-out migrant children have had greater geographical stability and, thus, more time to become acculturated into the local community than have still mobile migrant children. The academic performances of settled-out and mobile migrant children were compared using grades four, five, and six in 31 elementary and middle schools in northwest Ohio for the first grading period of the 1986-87 school year. The data analysis confirmed the first and second expectations of the hypothesis; but, surprisingly and disconcertingly, did not support the third. Although settled-out migrant children consistently were found to be significantly academically superior to mobile migrant children throughout the three grades examined, it appeared, in this case at least, that both groups performed less well academically as they spent more years in school.

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INTRODUCTION

The educational literature concerned with migrant school children is considerable and replete with attention to both their disadvantaged socioeconomic status and ensuing academic problems in the classroom setting (Harrington 1987, Santiago 1986, Phillips 1985, Zimmerman 1981a,b, Stout 1980, Laughlin 1980, Montoya 1980). Although the professional literature has examined the geographical factor of mobility, it has done so only in the general sense (Jones and Murray 1986, Prewitt Diaz and Seilhamer 1985, Inbar 1982). As social geographers interested in the impact of the spatial nature and spatial interaction of various cultural phenomena, the authors speculated about possible academic differentials existing between these two types of children (i.e., still mobile migrant children and children who formerly were mobile but have subsequently settled-out of the migrant stream). It was felt that a worthwhile contribution could be made with such an examination. The authors realize that the narrow scope of this study is not definitive. However, the study is seen as providing an initial step that hopefully will stimulate further investigation.

While teaching in an Ohio community where the influx of migrant workers and their families is not uncommon, three specific questions arose which this study examined and attempted to answer: 1. Do settled-out migrant children perform more favorably academically within the public school system than those who are still mobile?; 2. If such an academic performance differential is found to exist, is it significant?; and, 3. Do settled-out migrant children improve academically through time? The three-part working hypothesis of this study, in response to the

questions above, was "yes." These three findings were expected to occur because settled-out children have had greater geographical stability and, therefore, more time to become acculturated into the resident community. To provide the necessary background prior to the comparative analysis of academic performance between settled-out and mobile migrant children, migrant labor definitions and child education were first briefly reviewed.

DEFINITIONS. The terms "migrant laborer," "mobile migrant," and "settled-out migrant" are defined here. Workers engaging in temporary seasonal employment moving systematically from place to place and without establishing permanent residency in their work areas are known as "migrant laborers" (Ornati 1986). Most migrant laborers in the United States are from various racial and ethnic minority backgrounds including Mexican, Puerto Rican, Asian, American Indian, and Black with very few whites or Anglos (Van Tine 1989, Laughlin 1980). Many maintain a home base, and that base, for almost half, is in the southern United States; particularly Texas. Thus, many migrant laborers are Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who annually travel through as many as 32 states following the maturation cycles of numerous crops. Almost every state has migrant laborers, with the leading states being California, Michigan, Texas, and Florida (Ornati 1986). "Mobile migrants" work under the above conditions with families traveling much of the year. However, migrant laborers deciding to discontinue their mobile lifestyle and remain in a given area for at least six years are termed "settled-out migrants."

Ohio migrant laborers are asked to complete a Certificate of Eligibility resulting in their assignation to one of three Status Levels. Status Levels 1 and 2 refer to mobile migrants either within Ohio (Level 1) or throughout the

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United States (Level 2). Level 3 migrants are those who have settled-out prior to the last six years because, as mentioned, after six years of residency, migrant status is no longer applicable for purposes of the educational system.

MIGRANT CHILDREN AND EDUCATION. The use of child labor, in addition to migrant labor, in the United States has been widespread (Slesinger 1985). One unfortunate consequence of migratory lifestyles and traditional local attitudes is the negative impact on a child's formal education. The National Child Labor Committee (1977) discovered that the average non-migrant head of household completed 12 years of formal education compared to just four years for the average migrant head of household, a ratio of 3 to 1. This committee estimated that between 500,000 and one million children were eligible for services according to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1966. Under this provision, public school districts may request federal funds to provide educational programs for children from low-income families. These funds allow mainstreamed migrant students to be tutored, if necessary. Congress amended Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in order to lessen the impact of educational disadvantage on migrant children. This amendment (Educational Consolidation Improvement Act of 1981) was directed specifically toward their special educational needs. However, enforcing this new law has been difficult. Eligibility does not guarantee that these educational services will actually be rendered because: 1. some eligible children are not recruited; 2. paperwork is not properly completed for others who have been recruited; 3. some school districts are unwilling to implement these programs; and, 4. some children are not enrolled in the program or even in school at all locations, primarily because of economic resistance; and, to a lesser degree, inexperience by their families.

Properly administering educational funds is a monumental task with situational obstacles such as the transmittal of records between schools. Therefore, the Migrant Student Record Transfer System was created. This data base system, headquartered in Little Rock, Arkansas, has more than 130 terminals nationwide. It attempts to keep complete current education and health records for all migrant children (Arkansas State Dept. of Education 1987, Ruth 1980, Lewis 1976).

Unfortunately, the ability of migrants to cope with ever-changing situations is diminished by their very mobility. Sedentary students more easily make the transition from home to school than do migrant children whose parents are often poorly educated and for whom schooling may have been hostile and unrewarding. Native cultures and languages of many migrants are often different from those encountered in their temporary geographical surroundings. Some migrant parents are not as likely as non-nomadic parents to organize themselves in order to alter institutions. Such parents perceive that they may be treated with contempt by the school, may not be understood by school personnel, or that their actions may incur punishment of their children. The aim of this study, therefore, was to focus upon the problem of mobility specifically in terms of its effect on academic performance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Gathering data on migrant students was not an easy task, as they do not constitute a large percentage of total students and are often in a given school for only a portion of the school year (California State Dept. of Housing and Community Development 1987, Comptroller General of the U.S. 1983). Lacking access to parental Certificates of Eligibility designating Status Levels, all migrant students in this study were identified with the help of school administrators who also imposed subject anonymity. This data limitation, therefore, precluded tracking individual students over time. In order to accumulate a statistically significant sample size of at least 30 migrant students for each grade level examined, it was necessary to create a study region of 31 elementary and middle schools in northwestern Ohio. This geographical region had an increased population of approximately 10,400 migrant workers during the seven-month period from April through October, 1986 (Ohio Bureau of Employment Services 1986). The grade levels included in this pilot study were fourth, fifth, and sixth, chosen specifically in order to maximize the number of migrant children per grade level, which was consonant with a 1970 study showing that only 22% of the total school enrollment of migrant children were above the sixth grade (Sunderlin 1971). The time frame of the present study was necessarily the first (i.e., fall) grading period of the 1986-87 school year, since most migrant laborers in northwestern Ohio remained in the area throughout these nine weeks but left the local school district in late autumn. The educational performances of settled-out children with those still mobile were then compared in this study using letter grades (i.e., "A" - "F"), as recorded on their permanent records. The existence of teacher bias was not addressed in this study as it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the impact of such bias on grades (Mounts 1986, Lawless 1986, Judson 1978).

The letter grades received were plotted in histogram form for each of the three grade levels, fourth through sixth. Five bars were used per histogram, representing percentages of letter grades ("A" - "F") received by migrant children. Double bars were used to separate performances of settled-out children from mobile migrant children, thus enabling visual comparisons to be easily made. A fourth, composite histogram aggregated the satisfactory letter grade (i.e., "C" and above) data from the previous three figures. It provides at a glance the relative academic performances of the two types of migrant children for the three grade levels. To test for statistical significance, differences in performance were analyzed using a proportion test (Van Tassel 1981).

RESULTS

The histogram of grades received by migrant students in the fourth grade (Fig. 1) shows a clear disparity between settled-out and mobile children. Settled-out students academically outperformed mobile students, achieving more high grades (i.e., "A", "B") and fewer low grades (i.e., "D", "F"). Settled-out children received 4% "D" grades and no "F" grades, while achieving almost twice as many "B" grades (their median and mode) as did the mobile children ("C" median and mode). In contrast, mobile

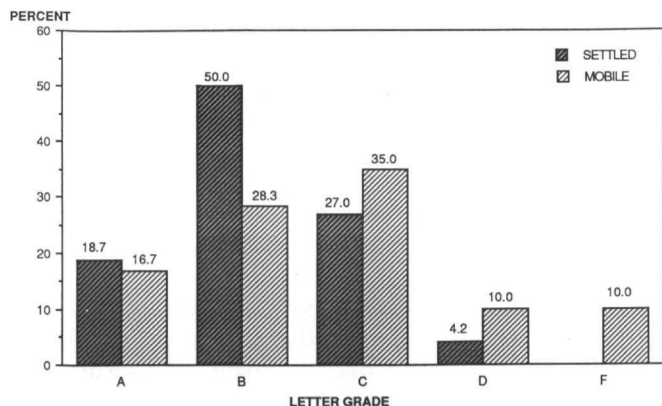


FIGURE 1. Comparison of academic performance between settled-out and mobile migrant children: Grade 4.

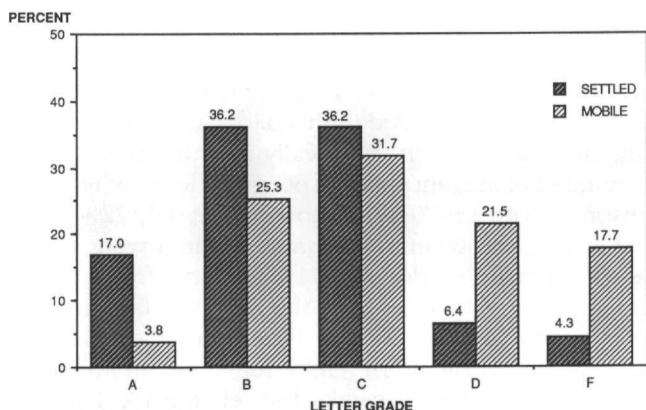


FIGURE 2. Comparison of academic performance between settled-out and mobile migrant children: Grade 5.

children received 20% "D" and "F" grades.

The academic disparity between settled-out and mobile migrant students found for the fourth grade also occurred in the fifth grade (Fig. 2). Settled-out children again academically outperformed mobile children, achieving almost twice as many high grades and far fewer low grades. However, settled-out children received some "F" grades as well as "D" grades (approximately 11% of total). The median letter grade received remained a "B", but the mode dropped to "B"/"C". The mobile children's academic performance also declined. The proportion of "A" grades received (about 4%) was less than one-fourth the number received in fourth grade, while the proportions of "D" and "F" grades received (approximately 40%) were almost double their fourth grade performance. Again, "C" was their median and mode. Overall, both student groups appeared to be negatively impacted academically to a much greater extent in the fifth grade as compared to the fourth grade. Both groups received lower percentages of higher grades and higher percentages of lower grades at the fifth grade level.

The sixth grade migrant student histogram (Fig. 3) continues to display a pronounced academic disparity between settled-out and mobile children already evidenced in grades four and five. Settled-out children once again academically outperformed mobile children, achieving more high grades, fewer "D" grades, and no "F" grades. However, both the median and mode grades dropped to the "C" level. Positively, compared to fifth

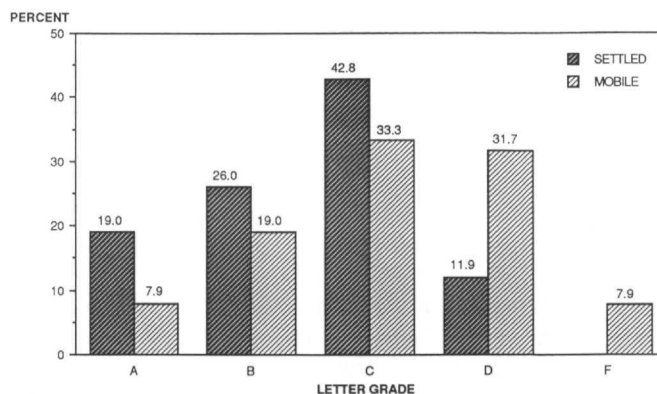


FIGURE 3. Comparison of academic performance between settled-out and mobile migrant children: Grade 6.

grade performance, mobile children achieved twice the number of "A" grades received (8%) and less than half of the "F" grades received (8%). For sixth grade, the mobile children maintained a "C" median and mode. Analysis of the sixth grade data revealed that performances of both student groups varied directly in the percentages of all five letter grades received compared to fifth grade, as follows: 1. increase in "A" grades received; 2. decrease in "B" grades received; 3. increase in "C" and "D" grades received; and, 4. decrease in "F" grades received.

DISCUSSION

An overview of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade settled-out and mobile migrant student academic performances (Figs. 1-3) revealed a major similarity. In general, a variation in the letter grades received by both migrant groups occurred in the three grade levels examined summarized as follows: 1. "A" grades decreased from fourth to fifth grade and increased from fifth to sixth grade, especially for mobile children; 2. "B" grades decreased from fourth through sixth grade; 3. "C" grades increased from fifth to sixth grade, although, from fourth to fifth, the settled-out increased while the mobile children's grades decreased; 4. "D" grades increased from fourth through sixth grade; and, 5. "F" grades increased from fourth to fifth grade and decreased from fifth to sixth grade.

On a positive note, the highest and lowest possible letter grades (i.e., "A", "F", respectively) increased and decreased respectively from fifth to sixth grade, showing higher academic achievement levels. This is a reversal of the findings from fourth to fifth grade, where the highest and lowest letter grades achieved decreased and increased respectively. Thus, it appeared that fifth grade was particularly disruptive, at least for the two extremes of academic performance. This is not an altogether unexpected finding, as Inbar (1982) found that beyond age 11 (i.e., fifth grade) children tend to suffer less from environmental stress.

A composite histogram of the three grades examined (i.e., fourth - sixth) (Fig. 4) presents aggregate percentages for satisfactory letter grades (i.e., "A" - "C") received by the settled-out and mobile migrant children. Whereas 88%-96% of settled-out migrant children in fourth through sixth grade received these higher letter grades, only 60%-80% of the mobile migrant children in these three grades

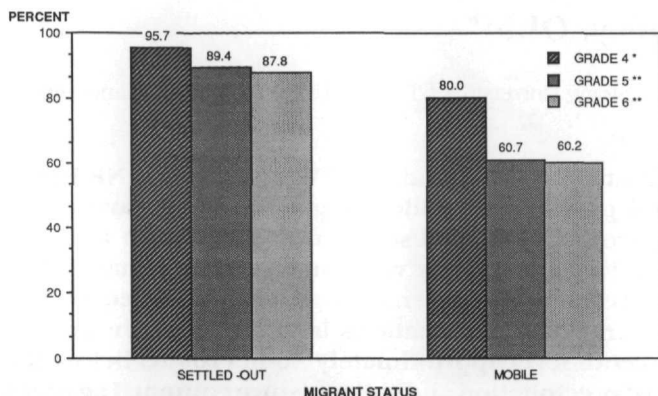


FIGURE 4. Comparison of satisfactory academic performance (i.e., "A" – "C") between settled-out and mobile migrant children: Grade levels 4–6.

* Significantly different at $p < 0.05$

** Significantly different at $p < 0.01$

received them. In addition, although both groups declined in academic performance from fourth through sixth grade, the mobile children showed a sharper decline (80%–60%) than did settled-out migrant children (96%–88%), another significant difference. Beginning with a 15.7% differential between the two migrant student groups in fourth grade, this figure almost doubles in fifth and sixth grades (i.e., 28.7% and 27.6%, respectively). Given the overwhelmingly negative impact accorded to the factor of mobility by the professional literature, these two supporting findings are not surprising. This study, by separating migrant students into settled-out and still mobile categories, was able to quantitatively examine and corroborate this widely held belief.

The first and second expectations of the hypothesis appear to be confirmed. Overall, settled-out migrant children academically outperformed mobile migrant children in a statistically significant manner throughout the three grade levels examined. However, the third expectation of the hypothesis that settled-out migrant children will improve academically through time from expected acculturation does not appear to be borne out here. Examination of the data suggested that both groups of migrant children performed less well academically as they spent more years in school. These latter findings are both surprising and disconcerting. They most likely reflect the inability of migrants, both mobile and settled-out, to be culturally integrated into the local schools and communities. Reflecting on previous research (Santiago 1986, Ockerman-Garza 1982), school social isolation leading to continued rejection probably has a major negative impact upon a migrant child's academic achievements.

Because this is the first known study that compares migrant students internally according to their geographical stability based upon two quite different residential living modes; and, because of the spatial, temporal, and numerical limitations comprising the scope of this study, these observed trends obviously cannot be applied to all migrant children in all areas at all times. However, these trends are both valid and useful considering the sample size, study area, grade levels, and time frame selected and examined. The research findings presented here also indicate that further studies are warranted. Additional research could seek to: 1. substantiate the results of the

present study; 2. extend the scope of the present study to include first, second, and third grade migrant children; and, 3. examine the degree to which geographical stability has occurred.

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